



# Breaking through the barriers

Equal access to learning for all

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# Foreword

By **Frances O'Grady**  
TUC Deputy General Secretary

**All too often the lion's share of development opportunities have gone to the high-flyers, the people already blessed with good skills and qualifications. At the other end of the spectrum, far too many ordinary workers have missed out – part-time women workers with caring responsibilities; older workers out of learning for decades; migrant workers denied access to English language training; disabled workers suffering prejudice at work; and temporary and agency workers who often are simply off the radar when it comes to learning.**

All of this goes some way to explaining why this country remains such an unequal place. And that's why we in the trade union movement must see learning and skills as fundamentally about equality. Training and skills are crucial to better jobs, better prospects and a better quality of life for workers, families and whole communities.

Regardless of age, race, gender, class, sexual orientation, religion or belief, disability or the passport they hold, every worker should enjoy an equal chance to up-skill or learn something new at work.

Union learning has a massive contribution to make in helping that goal become a practical reality – building individual and collective confidence, and dealing with discrimination, disadvantage and unfairness wherever we find it.

This publication brings together the voices of unions, partner organisations, practitioners and learners to highlight the range of barriers faced by many and to demonstrate what can be achieved through union learning. I hope it will inspire you to take this agenda forward in the months and years ahead. Let's put equality and diversity at the heart of union learning. And let's make learning part and parcel of the wider struggle for equality.

# Introduction



**Learning changes lives. It also changes attitudes, provides better job prospects, transforms personal situations and breathes a new confidence into learners. However, many people are still not feeling the benefit of learning – the joy of reading to their children, the discovery of a new talent, or the simple pleasure of acquiring a whole new range of skills.**

Unlocking talent and skills benefits the individual, the workplace, the economy and society. It also makes for a fairer society because education empowers and learning endures. People gain the confidence to challenge what they think is wrong and this can change society, attitudes and prejudices. So it's in all our interests for education to be accessed by all, in the fight against discrimination.

The trade union movement has its roots in the nineteenth century struggle for wider access to education and we have not given up fighting for everyone to have free and fair access to learning. This publication outlines the barriers that many people still face when trying to access education and showcases best practice. Of course, this is only a small sample of the great work being done by unions and learning reps, who work with employers on a daily basis to increase the UK's skills levels and improve individual's life chances.

***Breaking Through the Barriers*** shows how we can overcome some of the barriers faced by disabled people, by older people, women, and those identifying as lesbian, gay, bisexual or trans or as black and minority ethnic. There is practical advice showcased by the case studies and also at the end of the publication.

We hope that ***Breaking Through the Barriers*** will inspire employers to help remove some of the barriers to learning, empower learners to break down the barriers to their progress and give union learning reps and others the confidence to open up access to learning to all.

» For more case studies and examples, see the unionlearn website at [www.unionlearn.org.uk](http://www.unionlearn.org.uk).

# Access to learning: an equality issue

The Equality and Human Rights Commission's first Triennial Review *How Fair is Britain?* (2010) mapped the different experiences of groups protected by the Equality Act across key activities, to identify progress and sticking points on equality. On education, we found some progress, but inequality was rife, with access to learning and learning outcomes still very different by gender, socio-economic group, ethnicity and disability. The report showed that one in five of the British population has a first degree level qualification, but one in six has no qualifications and lacks basic functional literacy. Those with no or low skills are likely to be older, disabled and from particular ethnic minority groups, specifically black Caribbean, Bangladeshi and Pakistani.







By **Anne Madden**  
Head of Education, Skills and  
Employability Policy, EHRC

In these difficult times when the penalty of low or no skills is dire, these levels of inequality in learning are neither fair nor acceptable. To focus action on where it is most urgently needed, the review identified the 15 top inequality challenges facing society. Unsurprisingly, because of its power to open doors to better life chances, education features strongly in the list – in particular closing performance gaps and reducing segregation levels for different groups of learners.

The Equality Act has created a stronger framework for delivery of learning and employment opportunities. A major focus of our work has been on creating codes and guidance for learning providers and employers. Our guidance for learners is now available too.<sup>1</sup>

One of the most exciting new Equality Act provisions is the extension to positive action. It has never been used to its potential, but it is now bigger and better so that action can be taken to tackle disadvantage, special needs and under-representation. This has been illustrated well by the *Pathways to Work for Women* initiative, which has shown the power of positive action and partnership working. Involving over 3,000 employers and 12 Sector Skills Councils and trade unions, it has effectively tackled horizontal and vertical segregation. One in five of the 23,000 women participants over its three years had no qualifications before the project; many are now in management roles in non-traditional work. Creating this type of targeted learning for minority employees could make a real difference.

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<sup>1</sup> [www.equalityhumanrights.com/legal-and-policy/equality-act/](http://www.equalityhumanrights.com/legal-and-policy/equality-act/)



# A woman's role

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# Barriers to women accessing learning and education

## Childcare

For many women with childcare responsibilities, fitting learning (whether it's FE, HE or school education) around childcare and work can prove to be a huge barrier. Many FE and HE colleges have been forced to close their on-site childcare facilities, which has a great impact on women's abilities to attend courses.

## Poverty and social exclusion

Women and girls living in poverty are less likely to have the funds or the time to access learning opportunities. Women and girls who are unable to access learning due to poverty often find themselves in a Catch 22 situation. They don't have the financial resources to continue their education but by dropping out, they find that opportunities for employment and career progression – and therefore getting out of poverty – are limited.



By **Scarlet Harris**  
TUC Women's Equality Policy Officer

## Gender stereotyping

Gender stereotyping still plays a huge role in girls' and women's choices. Stereotyped notions of what girls should learn and aspire to surround us, from gendered toy sections in shops (with construction and science kits for boys and hairdressing toys and dolls for girls) to college brochures illustrated with pictures of young men and women doing stereotypical courses. For some girls and women this is a subtle, subliminal pressure. For others it is more explicit, for example, being told not to pursue a specific course of study by parents or teachers. The stereotyping can come from a wide range of people including teachers and careers advisors, family, friends, peers and employers (on vocational courses such as apprenticeships or in-work training).

## Learning environment

In the vocational learning sector, in particular, the typical make up of the course and the environment can present barriers to women. For example, TUC studies of gender and apprenticeships found examples of residential apprenticeship courses where a small minority of teenage girls had to live in a residential training facility with hundreds of teenage boys. For many young women this would be a daunting and possibly off-putting prospect. Other examples include sexual harassment, a sexist workplace culture including topless calendars and sexist jokes, ill-fitting uniforms designed for men, a lack of changing facilities or no women-only toilets.

# Engineering change – what Kate did next...

**Dr Kate Coleman’s overalls are a bit on the big side, so she has to roll up the legs and sleeves. Occasionally when she visits an old or remote power station she has to use the men’s toilets. But that is as bad as it gets being a woman, she says, working for E.ON, the power company, as a boiler integrity engineer. She is the only female on her ten-member team, but there are other women engineers in the company she can talk to, and increasingly young women graduates are coming up through the ranks.**

Kate said: “People always want to hear horror stories, but to be honest there are lots of opportunities for women in engineering. It’s not like it was 40 years ago; the engineering industry is open to women. The problem is getting that message across to young women. The myth that women are somehow predisposed not to be suitable as scientists still prevails. That is why I try to show others that it is possible.”

Kate has been chosen for the UKRC project “Ingenious Women”. Its aim is to give 20 mid-career women engineers training and support to enable them to raise their profile and share their passion for engineering. Only eight per cent of engineers are women and only three per cent of engineering apprentices are women. At Exeter University, Kate was one of five girls among the 60 students that year. However, she said: “I never felt singled out or that I was in the wrong place. It was a good experience being in that environment. There is no getting away from the fact that physics is difficult, but it’s not more difficult because you are a woman.”



By **Frances Rafferty**

After graduating, Kate went on to Bath University to take a masters degree in aerospace engineering: an interesting choice for someone with a fear of flying! Her next step was to enrol on a PhD at Cranfield University, writing a thesis on fireside corrosion in biomass combustion systems and looking at carbon neutral ways to generate energy.

When Kate joined E.ON, she immediately became a member of Prospect. Kate believes that unions can play a role in providing advice and support to women in engineering and other ‘non-traditional’ areas and she has been to E.ON open days to encourage girls to think about joining the company as apprentices. She said: “I give them a short talk and try to inspire them, but most of all they seem to enjoy the hands-on experience we offer, so they can see that it is something they can do. I tell them that there are plenty of opportunities and say that I love my job and want to be involved in engineering for the rest of my life.”



Only eight per cent of engineers are women and only three per cent of engineering apprentices are women.

# Learning and equality – a potential for transformation?

“The more you refuse to hear my voice, the louder I will sing”  
(Labi Sifre, *Something inside so strong*)

**The above quotation is resonant of what many women union activists feel following their exposure to union learning in all its forms. Based on a study of women union activists, we find that union learning is an essential and ongoing attribute of the successful union activist and leader. But the impact of union learning on equality takes many forms and here we focus on gender and ethnicity.<sup>1</sup>**

Our study of black activists showed that black women particularly were avid for learning and tended to snap up union courses. Learning was expressed as a crucial part of culture and it was recognised that the union offered key learning opportunities. Sometimes, these were opportunities that were denied the women in the mainstream organisations in which they worked. The union offered paths of inclusion in the context of often exclusionary experiences in the employing organisations. Moreover, becoming a learning representative would also be a path to greater union involvement.

But learning has wide social and equality implications. More than simply contributing to women’s union (and organisational) careers, learning transfers to the women’s homes and their communities. For example, one woman talked of how she took what she had learned in her union training back to her own children. She would say, ‘you are not doing that right; this is how you have to present yourself and your paperwork.’ In this sense, she saw the interrelationship of the benefits of union learning in the workplace and its wider educational





By **Professor Geraldine Healy**  
Centre for Research in Equality and Diversity,  
Queen Mary College, University of London

and societal contribution. This was also illustrated by women who became role models through their own role in the learning process. Again, using the example of black women, a woman union activist stated that: “There are a lot of black people and ethnic minorities here, and seeing a black woman as a teacher, you know, you are a role model to them... You cannot separate culture from learning and that’s an advantage.”

Sometimes when thinking about the effects of learning on equality, it is difficult to unpick the causal relationship between learning and equality. Often, getting involved in the union is a gradual and incremental process. This means that such involvement slowly builds up a body of knowledge but also contributes to personal development that stands the union activist in good stead in their organisational, union and personal lives. Our study revealed how women would challenge the status quo when they saw inequalities at work. In some cases, they would also challenge union representatives who were not equality aware and therefore would not recognise cases of discrimination when they were put before them. Such challenges are a crucial outcome of learning, which in itself can have a potential for transformation. As one woman put it succinctly, “What I learnt from the conference is that you can change the system. You have to work at it.”

Thus if learning results in a preparedness to challenge discrimination and to ensure black and white women’s voices are heard, learning is in different ways working to transform unions and organisations.

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<sup>1</sup> Bradley, H. and Healy, G. *Ethnicity and Gender at Work: inequalities, careers and employment relations* (London and New York, 2008).



# Education: a step up for vulnerable workers

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# Making sure that vulnerable workers don't miss out on learning

One type of learner, often forgotten, is the 'vulnerable' worker, who could be defined as someone who is outsourced, low-paid, part-time, or has an insecure job tenure. Approximately 20 per cent are from a black and minority ethnic (BME) background and they are predominantly women. My trade union, UNISON, has a strong record in engaging these groups and we have invested in education and supported specific projects for the hidden and the vulnerable workforce. For example, UNISON's Learning Equality & Diversity project has been funded by the Union Learning Fund and used to support some English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) provision.

Vulnerable workers face many barriers when trying to access learning:

- They often have hostile employers who are more interested in getting the most work out of them than in skills development. Even where unions are recognised, some employers may only provide the minimum statutory training needed.
- Public funds for ESOL for low-paid workers have been greatly reduced, so it is even less viable for providers to run courses for small numbers in the workplace. Lack of funding also means learners may be asked to contribute more to the costs of learning, placing a financial barrier in the way.
- Since workers with ESOL needs have mixed abilities, they need a higher degree of differentiation and tailored learning which is not always possible.
- Vulnerable workers are more likely to work in shift patterns or work unsociable hours and many are juggling more than one part-time job which makes it harder to access learning.



By **Davinder Sandhu**  
National Learning and Workforce  
Development Officer, UNISON

- Changes to the careers service make it even harder for workers to access Information, Advice and Guidance services and some workers need it in their own language.
- Many fear that they will lose their jobs, if they do something that is not supported by the employer. Although they want to improve their skills, they are scared to speak out.

As we all know, once individuals get engaged on the learning journey, they are often thirsty for more. Some workers with ESOL needs may be quite highly qualified and professionals in their own countries, but may need advice on how to obtain the equivalents of their qualifications and how they can retrain in this country.

In the Highlands of Scotland, UNISON runs a Migrant Workers Project through which UNISON identifies and addresses some of the training needs of migrant workers across a range of sectors in the area. The geographical spread of the Highlands, and other rural areas, means workers cannot easily access learning. However, workers involved in the project have said that learning helps them to integrate with the local community and to be more confident.

# Justice through education

**Unite has supported the *Justice for Cleaners* campaign, which came to alleviate the struggles of cleaners in Canary Wharf, the City of London and the Tube, and gave a voice to a workforce that until now had been invisible. Through education the cleaners were empowered and encouraged to stand up against their employers.**

As the saying goes 'knowledge is power'. By being able to access education through the T&G and now Unite, I have been able to support my fellow cleaners. Education has been the driving force for the success of the campaign. Migrants dominate the cleaning industry in London with English as a second language. To overcome this and to support the campaign the union organised ESOL, IT, literacy and numeracy classes. And as one of the first union learning reps for the Justice for Cleaners campaign and Branch Secretary, I was encouraged by workmates to attend the free weekend classes held at the Holborn London Office. From 2007 to 2010 the Migrant Workers Project (MWP) grew to include these other migrant groups: Justice for Domestic Workers, the Chinese Migrant Network and Branch 1647 (London Hotel and Catering Branch).



By **Kwasi Agyemang-Prempeh**

Unite activist and equality and diversity award winner

In April 2010 the four groups came together to form the United Migrant Workers Education Project (UMWEP) under the umbrella of Unite. Owing to funding difficulties and the government's restrictions on migrants' access to education, UMWEP devised the Alternative Education Model. This programme of ESOL, IT, numeracy, literacy, art, dance, drama, English pronunciation and a number of specialist workshops such as health for women draws on community volunteer tutors. They deliver an informal education curriculum, through which they have trained almost 2,000 learners to the level where they can read their employment contracts, terms and conditions and have the confidence to stand up for justice.

As a result of the education I have received from Unite, I have had the opportunity to represent my fellow cleaners, speak at rallies and meetings, one of which, was in front of 2,500 people. I was invited to speak in Nagasaki, Japan and Toulouse, France on behalf of the Service Sector on the subjects of organising at grassroots level and young people. I sit on the London and East Regional Committee as the BAEM Territorial Rep. I represent my region on the Executive Council and I am proud to say I sit on the Education Sub Committee for Unite.

# Leeds Learning Exchange is just the job

I felt worthless, had no confidence and no self-esteem at all, and I had no idea of how or where to get advice, I certainly felt utterly alone, and useless. Walking into the Leeds Learning Exchange was definitely the best thing I have done in a very long time. The offices are so welcoming and friendly, very modern with great facilities and I really felt at ease. From that very first meeting I was inspired and determined to change my situation.







By **Wendy Fletcher**

Unite member, who has benefited from its national redundancy Members Matters strategy

In the first meeting, Jim Ritchie showed me how to create the perfect CV for myself (I now cringe at the CV I had been using! And it was quickly relegated to the bin!) Jim was able to advise me on how best to put my skills down onto a CV and I came away from that first meeting feeling so much better about myself and with a whole new CV. Within two weeks I started to get replies from jobs I had applied for. Jim introduced me to his colleague Gill Pearson, who was then able to guide me through the Adult Numeracy Level 2. After completing two or three simple tests, Gill was able to advise me on my strengths and weaknesses in numeracy. In preparation for the test itself, I completed several mock tests at home online concentrating on certain areas as Gill advised and then went back to the centre to take the test for real – which I passed!

Thanks to the Leeds Learning Exchange, in the space of six weeks, I now have two nationally recognised certificates equivalent to GCSE Grade A–C and a CV so impressive I was interviewed four times in two weeks and was offered one of those positions. I now plan to take an ITQ1 and ITQ2 course through Unite’s Moodle site for online learning. Without the help of the tutors at Unite, I would not have been able to achieve so much and in such a short space of time. I only wish that the facilities I have been able to use were more widely advertised, as I am sure there are so many people, young and more mature, who are in the same position as I was and would benefit so much from them.



# Learning abilities

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# Access all learning areas?

**The starkest learning inequalities are those facing disabled people. From early learning, through schooling, to in-work training and career and promotion opportunities – or lack of them – disabled people lose out on all counts. Disabled people across the UK are three times as likely to have no qualifications as non-disabled people and the employment rate for disabled men without qualifications halved from the mid 1970s to the early 2000s. More than 1 in 5 adults in Britain today is disabled, yet only half are likely to be in work compared to four-fifths of non-disabled adults and they are more likely than others to be employed in routine, unskilled elementary jobs, to work part-time, and to have poorer access to training and development opportunities.**

Our Working Better programme has provided some insights into barriers to learning for disabled people, with disabled employees saying that they had had high aspirations for learning and careers – but these had been thwarted by experience and reality<sup>1</sup>. They reported that employers “underestimated their ability, holding deep-rooted beliefs that disability meant inability”. Senior people did not really believe that a disabled person was ‘up to’ promotion<sup>2</sup> and such judgements led disabled workers to self-limit.

The high rate of exit from employment is a key barrier to learning – one disabled person in six loses their job in the first year of being disabled, increasing to more than two in six in two years.<sup>3</sup> Long term or fluctuating health conditions may lead to extended periods of time away from work, resulting in a distancing from workplace learning opportunities.

Time out of work also means that disabled people may be unable to retain qualifications or professional registrations and some



By **Anne Madden**  
Head of Education, Skills and  
Employability Policy, EHRC

professions stipulate the demonstration of CPD requirements in order to retain membership. These are just a few of the problems faced by disabled people.

So what might open up better access to learning? Staying in work is key. Disabled people in our focus groups wanted to be part of mainstream work and to have the same skills and progression opportunities.<sup>4</sup> Many were reluctant to declare their disability and favoured employers proactively asking all employees what support they need, including for learning and progression.

Generic development opportunities were valued such as coaching, leadership programmes, training courses, secondments, academic study and employee support. Employers need to deliver more flexible training in the workplace, with more support for accessible learning, distance-learning and ‘keeping on board’ modules.

There was a plea for more to be done by professional bodies to open up CPD opportunities for those not working for health reasons. For example, this could be done by making more qualifying events available online or by considering small amounts of voluntary work to contribute towards targets.

More flexibility in ways of working and offering learning, and more support from line managers and work colleagues were the major asks from disabled people. Unions have a lot to offer to secure this.

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<sup>1</sup> Working Better is an EHRC programme, aimed at setting a new agenda to meet the changing needs of families, workers and employers. The Disability at Work report, part of a series, is launched in 2012. [www.equalityhumanrights.com/key-projects/working-better/](http://www.equalityhumanrights.com/key-projects/working-better/)

<sup>2</sup> Sayce, L., (2010). A review for government *Getting in, Staying in and Getting on: disability employment support fit for the future*. DWP, June 2011.

<sup>3</sup> Burchardt, T. (2003) *Employment Retention and the Onset of Sickness or Disability: evidence from Labour Force Survey longitudinal datasets*. DWP in-house report 109, London: DWP

<sup>4</sup> Adams, L. And Oldfield, K. *Opening up Work: the views of disabled people and people with long term health conditions*. Forthcoming.

# Even tutors have something to learn

**In my role as Learning Development Co-ordinator for Equality and Diversity (funded by a Union Learning Fund (ULF) project), I have to examine and analyse the Equality Act 2010 and its impact on learning and training for our members. I also look at ways in which we can break down barriers for all vulnerable workers, as well as supporting our communities and developing Community Learning Champions (CLCs). We do a lot of work on hidden disabilities, such as dyslexia, which I have myself. But there are many ways in which the union can help its members with learning and even to become tutors.**

In Unite, we are proud of developing and training our own tutors not only to deliver the core programme for the union, but also Skills for Life and ICT (Information and Communication Technology). As a union, we run a national training programme, where we have developed an online and a five-day course for PTLLS (Preparing to Teach in the Lifelong Learning Sector). This is the first stage of becoming a tutor in Adult Learning and delivering the Unite core programme and support mentoring programme in the regions. Many people think it is easy to be a tutor but when there are barriers of language or disability this can make it harder and that is what we address.



By **Alexandra Morefield**  
Learning Development Co-ordinator,  
Equality and Diversity for Unite

In my role supporting this programme, I can recall on one Monday all but one of the students was sitting in the training room, when the door opened and in walked a Golden Retriever, followed by his owner Karl. Karl Wainwright is young man who had developed a visual disability only a few years previously but had taken the opportunity to try to become a tutor. I should point out that to pass the training course, the trainee tutor has to prepare and deliver their own tutoring session to the group, use ICT and flipcharts, etc.

As a longstanding tutor with my own disabilities, I know that this part of the course can be great challenge to anyone. When it was Karl's turn, without the support of his dog or anyone else, he delivered his session. In the feedback to the group he talked about the skills he had to develop due to his disability but joked that as he couldn't see us, he didn't get nervous like the other trainees. Karl is now a national activist on the Disability Committee, and attends national Unite and TUC conferences. He told me that thanks to the opportunity he had to attend the course, it gave him the confidence to be a part of Unite's future.

# Getting a second crack of the learning whip

## **I work with Alex Morefield, at Unite, to raise awareness of so-called ‘hidden disabilities’, such as dyslexia.**

When I found out I had dyslexia it came as quite a shock to me; but thinking back I am more shocked. For years I struggled with my literacy and I hated having to read out loud in front of the class. Each week in English lessons we had to take it in turns to read a passage out of a book that we had been given to read. I more or less gave up in the end and focused on what I did best, which was sport, but this did not get me any GCSEs so I left school with no qualifications.

I got a job in a factory. I can't say I enjoyed it, but it paid well. It was not until years later, when my past came back to haunt me, that I did my City & Guilds to become a qualified chef. It was not like it is today, where you can use a computer to do the written work; it was all paper-based. I remember having to write everything in pencil so I could get a friend to check my spelling, and then go over it in pen.

I was also a union rep, which I put a lot of my own time into. I became a lot more confident; this was mainly due to the union courses I had been taking, and I also did the advanced reps course at University! I had to use a computer to do the course. At that time I did not have any computer skills; I got a computer but I had no one to help me so it was really trial and error, but it was worth it in the end as having computer skills helped me when I applied for a job with the union.





By **Gill Campbell**

Learning Organiser for North East and Yorkshire & Humberside Unite

Since then I have never looked back. I have been able to further my education, on a personal as well as work level. I have been able to turn a negative (my dyslexia) into something positive, and hope that in the future with my life experiences and the education I have received through the union I can help and encourage others to further their education.

In a unionlearn online survey of 270 union learning reps (carried out between 21 September and 7 October, 2011) 8 out of 10 reps said that they were aware of colleagues and workmates with dyslexia, however only a third (33.6 per cent) said they had had training in supporting them. Over half (54.6 per cent) of reps said that workers with dyslexia had experienced barriers to training. During Dyslexia Awareness Week in 2011 (31 October to 6 November), unionlearn launched a campaign to help reps make workplaces dyslexia-friendly environments.

Unionlearn has published a guide for reps called *Dyslexia* which is part of the Literacy, Language and Numeracy series for union learning reps. You can find it at [www.unionlearn.org.uk/extrasUL/Skills/SFLpacks/TUC\\_Dyslexia%20\(4\).pdf](http://www.unionlearn.org.uk/extrasUL/Skills/SFLpacks/TUC_Dyslexia%20(4).pdf)

Unite has also published a guide for reps on dyslexia, which you can find at [www.unitetheunion.org/resources/equalities\\_2011/equalities\\_-\\_legacy\\_content/disability\\_rights/dyslexia\\_guide.aspx](http://www.unitetheunion.org/resources/equalities_2011/equalities_-_legacy_content/disability_rights/dyslexia_guide.aspx)



# Encouraging older workers to learn

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# Learning boosts well-being

**During the last decade, there was a substantial shift in the nature of older people's learning. This was driven by government policy to focus learning resources on young people, vocational skills and formal qualifications and also by the fee rises caused by restraints in public expenditure.**

There is a clear benefit for learning for all age ranges, including older workers, or older people. Study of the 1946 age cohort found a very strong correlation between participation in 'music/arts evening classes' and measures of well-being. In fact in one measure, it was strong enough to cancel out the normal age-related decline in well-being over the relevant period and this was unaffected by employment or marital status.

For most older people, participation in formal and exam-based courses was not related to well-being or any of the measures – but there was increased pressure to link courses to qualifications.

While employers may not think badly of older workers, frontline managers may be less sympathetic. Negative attitudes to learning are limiting older workers and if expectations of older workers are low, then real opportunities will be denied them.

We need to find better ways of recognising the skills that people have acquired and showing them that additional training based on these skills can result in a qualification which can make a difference – particularly when someone is changing a job or faced with redundancy.



By **Chris Ball**  
Chief Executive, The Age and Employment  
Network (TAEN)

Although the expectation of older people is that they will retire, many may embrace new careers, stay in work longer or work differently. Therefore, the investment in their skills is not really ‘a waste’ from the employer’s point of view. Those most likely to stay in work longer are in better health, with higher qualifications, in higher status jobs. They are among the most likely to be given training. And, given the chance to train, people generally take it.

Richard Ndombele is a migrant worker from the Congo, who is in his early fifties. He has held a number of jobs since he arrived in the United Kingdom and is currently working as a cleaner at the University of Salford. Although he attended university himself in his home country, he needed advice on how to transfer the value of his qualifications to enable him to look at further study/training and progressing at work. Through the Learning at Work Day event organised by the campus trade unions and sponsored by unionlearn North West, Richard discovered that the University of Bolton had a Graduate Employability programme funded by the European Social Fund (ESF). Having taken advice on transferring the credit value of his existing qualifications, he has now signed up for a Level 7 Advanced Diploma of Continuing Professional Development in Leadership and Management (part of the University’s MBA programme), which is fully funded by the project. Richard hopes to develop additional skills so that he can apply for relevant roles within the new university staffing structure.

# Graham Kingston – an Age Champion



**Graham, pictured left, works at MDEC (Royal Mail Data Entry Centre) in Stockport and ever since unionlearn North West launched its project activities aimed at older workers, Graham has embraced the role of championing the older worker. So much so that he was recognised for his achievements with a unionlearn Age Champion award.**

He has developed and delivered a range of activities taking into account the needs and interests of older workers, not only for his own union but for others and has also extended his support beyond the North West through national CWU activities. These activities have ranged from staging open days at Mowbray House Learning Centre for Retired Members, to promoting IT skills, to open language workshops at the same venue every Tuesday for PCS members. Not satisfied with all this, he has also completed an Older Activists course through the TUC in Liverpool.

It's a learning curve for Graham as well, so he understands his learners and has undertaken the Digital Champions course with Digital Unite to ensure he increases his knowledge to help older members get online. He has also done work with those aged 50+, to offer Information, Advice and Guidance (IAG) and CV advice to the Royal Mail early shift staff in Stockport, as the entire shift is being cut.



By **Janet Valentine**

Union Support Officer, unionlearn with the NW TUC

It's go, go, go for Graham, as he has also promoted 'casual learning' to older members, via work-time listening and learning sessions, which have gone down a treat. He is also working on equality and diversity as he develops a range of resources involving the input of older workers, which can offer 'legacy learning', for example a multicultural calendar and recipe book.

Through his union learning representative (ULR) activities he acts as a role model by overcoming his own barriers to learning, as well as helping others to do the same. He has developed a range of innovative interventions that have been instrumental in informing unionlearn's strategy in developing measures to assist unions in addressing the learning and skills issues resulting from our ageing workforce.

Graham says: "I feel that being a ULR is an extremely fulfilling role as you are able to turn the trust your learners/colleagues have in you into something that is life-changing for them – and this is all possible through the training I have received both through my union and organisations such as unionlearn. So to them I say a big thank you!"

Graham's aspirations are to continue learning and to pass both enthusiasm and knowledge on to others.



# Proud to learn: Building LGBT confidence



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# Painting the town purple

**Working with the employer on raising equalities has stemmed partly from self-organised groups (SOGs), as the University of Leeds has set up LGBT/BME/disabled staff network groups to draw on the expertise of staff. Self-identifying within one or more of the groups has helped to build a fully inclusive campus and to reach out to communities. In addition, our UNISON branch has always worked in partnership with the union's learning and equalities section.**

Thanks to a learning agreement set up by UNISON and the University, now well over a decade old, and still going strong as ever, members and staff on lower wages are offered Learning4Life funding and £135 per year for non work-related learning.

Partnerships with the employer are always good and equalities is the current partnership evolving now at the University of Leeds. The University Equalities and Diversity Committee, in which UNISON, Unite and UCU branches are active stakeholders, is working very well, raising the profile of equality and diversity. The main clock tower building of the University was floodlit purple to celebrate LGBT history month, a beacon for the city. University events are planned to draw in all staff and students. The student union has a full programme of events and the branch has a static display all month.



By **Chris Batty**

UNISON Education/Lifelong Learning  
Co-ordinator at the University of Leeds

I was able to take advantage of many union courses offered by both the TUC and UNISON. For example, I attended a regional UNISON SOG group training session on equality law, equality duties and the role of the equality rep and I have completed equality challenge unit training within the Forum for Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity Equality in post-School Education. This year I am attending the Disability Champions at Work training at the TUC and also organising Equality Reps training for all branch groups and SOGs (LGBT, women's, disabled, black and youth).

Learning provides opportunities for people to become confident. It may even give someone the confidence to come out and become a proud member of their LGBT SOG, or to develop an interest in the wider equalities issues, as I have done. By holding a Learning at Work event every year, we can focus attention on equalities and raise awareness among a whole range of staff, as well as building the equality groups. In May we shall be doing some informal training around dyslexia in the workplace and later in the year we hope to hold a special branch members social with LGBT Education, combined with some more informal training.

# HIV 24/7/365

**World AIDS Day is one day to educate people about a global epidemic that many live with and die from. But AIDS education is about more than 24 hours of wearing pretty ribbons and attending exhibitions (even though many are union-led and award winning). Over 33 million people around the world are living with HIV, with nearly three million new infections and two million deaths annually.**

As part of the PCS-Identity Passport Service workplace Better Health at Work initiative, we now have a platform to educate, support, help and inform our members and colleagues. I wanted to run a specific educational campaign to bring the issue of HIV back to the forefront, as in recent years a certain level of lethargy and complacency seems to have crept back. So, I felt that it was a good opportunity and prime time to raise the issue of HIV awareness once again, along with associated risk management strategies/safe sexual practices like wearing a condom, being careful and honest with partners about your sexual history and getting a regular routine HIV test if not in a monogamous relationship. After all, education is the key to fighting prejudice and ignorance.

This was the basis of our Roadshow and featured exhibition, into which a group of us put lots of hard work, effort and creativity to make it informative, educational and engaging. Working together was also a great chance to learn from others. I was keen to bring in outside groups and suggested MESMAC, a charity based in Newcastle that focuses on gay men. Other groups came in as well and made for a really strong presentation team.



By **Rachel Redhead**  
Public and Commercial Services Union

Our event at Milburngate was very well attended and lots of people from every level of the organisation came to see what all the fuss was about. They visited the sexual health stalls and also read the exhibition boards and hopefully were reminded of the salient point that HIV is still very much something people need to be acutely aware of. They certainly learned a lot from it.

The event at the Town Hall was on one of the coldest days of the year. However, we had to get people in to see the exhibition. That meant donning hats, scarves, coats and gloves and going out into the cold to hand out leaflets to passing members of the public, many of whom were doing their Christmas shopping and thinking of nothing else. But, most people were thankfully in Christmas spirit and some took valuable time out to visit the Roadshow.

The final event was at St Nic's church, a good venue but still it was the middle of December so once more we were wrapped up warm for leafletting duty. The parish vicar made a personal visit to the display and really enjoyed not only the content, but also the professionalism with how we conducted ourselves. By that time we'd had enough practice to look like we knew what we were doing!

Update: We've now won the gold level Better Health at Work award with a special bonus award for the HIV Roadshow.

World AIDS Day is just one day a year but people live with AIDS every day of their lives. Every day needs to be World AIDS Day, and that's the message we need to get across by educating the public.



# Minority report: BME support

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# Passing the learning on

**I became a trade union member in 1995 when I started work in local government and it didn't take me long to become a Workplace Steward. That was the beginning of a steep learning curve – I was offered training not only from my union, but also from the TUC. This gave me the confidence and ability to take on case work and progress to being an active rep, then branch officer, then regional committee member and then finally a Co-Vice Chair to a Self-Organised Group. My experience progressing through the union structure does not seem to be mirrored in workplaces though, where it's still difficult to progress. Perhaps it's because trade unionism galvanises activists from all backgrounds?**

I feel that trade unions offer a wide range of training courses but too few members take advantage of this, due in many cases to release issues. For example, I found helping staff with English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) issues very rewarding, but it was difficult getting release and ensuring that they continued to attend classes to obtain the accredited qualifications.

Union learning reps (ULRs) have a big role to play in the education and recruitment of potential members regardless of age, sexuality, gender, or disability. Importantly, they can engage young people and tell them about the benefits of joining a union and how they can develop their learning. But they also need the support of employers because the employer may sometimes say that it is not in their job description to follow this particular line of training and therefore not 'job-related', which is a barrier that most employees face at some point or another.





By **Oreleo Du Cran**

Union Support Officer, unionlearn  
Southern and Eastern Region TUC

As a ULR I have had extensive training in disability issues, for example, dyslexia, dyspraxia and dyscalculia and have been able to recommend employees for assessments under the Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) 1995. This has led to employers making reasonable adjustments and I also organised basic sign language awareness training for the London Borough of Newham (LBN) staff in 2009, which enabled school bus drivers to communicate with children from special needs schools.

As a ULR, you can cover a lot of ground for people and I have enjoyed a lot of variety in my role. Health and well-being is a key part of the workplace, as we are living longer and working longer. Heart disease, cancer, asthma and arthritis are just some of the illnesses that can impact on working life and awareness sessions on these subjects offer members positive information to help them and their families. In the Black communities Sickle Cell Anaemia affects one in every 2,000 and information is not readily available, so awareness workshops have been invaluable at learning events in Adult Learners' Week.

For me, the over-50s group represented those who benefited most from learning in the workplace. They seemed to believe that they were too old to learn and had developed a habit-forming tendency to avoid any learning or development. I was thrilled when many members in LBN completed 'Skills for Life' courses in literacy, ICT and numeracy up to Level 2. They can now use a computer and send emails to family and friends overseas, which has deeply enriched their lives and those of their families.

# Unlocking the talent of black and minority ethnic youth

**In 2008, despite roughly 20 per cent of the national school cohort at 16 coming from BME backgrounds, they made up barely 8 per cent of Apprenticeships<sup>1</sup>. Unsurprisingly this figure is unevenly distributed across sectors. In fact only 6 per cent of apprentices following a customer services framework in 2008 came from a BME background and only 3 per cent of apprentices in the hospitality sector – where you might expect to find, if anything, an over-representation, particularly in some markets such as Asian restaurants.**

Why is this? And what can be done – is being done – about it?

If one imagines a spectrum of reasons, from BME communities making a reasoned choice not to get involved through to the disturbing possibility of deliberate discrimination, it is likely that the reason, or reasons, will be found at different points along the way. What we at Versa have found is that in the vast majority of cases communities haven't engaged chiefly because not enough has been done to make them aware of Apprenticeships and of what they offer their young people.

Our work with communities, providers and employers seems to suggest that a number of factors have played a part:

- careless marketing emphasising traditional craft trades and/or traditional employee 'types' (often white and able-bodied)
- a failure by all parties to understand or engage with 'non-traditional' communities and to see them as differentiated
- the reliance by providers on tried-and-tested routes for finding apprentices, and, in these days of an excess of unemployed young people, little need to move outside these standard practices



By **Simon Tepper**  
Director of Versa Professional Services

- the progressive whittling away of IAG provision for young people, particularly when it comes to information about Apprenticeships
- a failure to engage with ethnic communities through their information channels and using their languages or to address what is of most concern to them
- employers not seeing the positive benefits that will accrue through diversifying their workforce.

But we believe this situation can be turned round.

The National Apprenticeship Service (and before them the LSC) is clearly aware of the problem and has invested in activity to understand what the issues may be and what the solutions are. What we have seen is that we need sustained work to engage with communities and encourage young people, their parents and community leaders to see an Apprenticeship as a valid career move (even leading to HE). By working with employers, providers, schools and other parties to diversify the cohort of apprentices, it is possible to plant the seeds of real enthusiasm for the programme and indeed to get meaningful numbers into jobs and training.

A further challenge will be to work with employers, not only to understand how diversifying their workforce can bring real benefits to their business, but also to support recruits from these under-represented communities once on the payroll. We are convinced that by working with unionlearn in this area we can help to make a difference.

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<sup>1</sup> *World-Class Apprenticeships: Unlocking Talent, Building Skills for All*, (DCSF, DIUS, 2008).

# Breaking the language barrier – Vion Foods and First Manchester

**Valerij Spakova, one of our migrant union reps working in the food processing industry at Vion Foods, got in touch because he wanted to help his colleagues. They were desperate to improve their English language skills. We managed to secure funding through a local college and we also asked permission to use the Unite Ipswich Office as a venue.**

Almost 40 people from a variety of backgrounds attended a skills assessment and sign-up day. The day was a tremendous success with 38 people joining the English Classes and 15 of those became members of our trade union for the first time!

The feedback from these learners has been tremendous and, as a result, we have now another 45 people interested in learning English, so we are trying to secure funding from providers to be able to fulfil these hard workers' expectations. We are very proud of this achievement and believe that collectively we will make a difference in these workers' lives.

They will get a skill for life. They will be able to get more integrated in our society. They will be able to stand up for themselves at work.

**First Manchester (part of First UK Bus), employs over 1,800 bus drivers, and continues to invest in its employees with the same rigor it invests in its business. The company offers its staff flexible training and learning opportunities. Central to the successful learning taking place at the depot are the Unite ULRs delivering and supporting numeracy, literacy and ESOL. In partnership with the union, the company paid for their training costs.**



By **Orlando Martins**  
Regional Learning Organiser at Unite  
(Vion Foods); and **Michelle Holmes**

ESOL sessions are offered on Saturday mornings and Wednesdays, with drop-in sessions available most days of the week. The Unite/First UK Bus national learning agreement allows for partners to take part in lifelong learning opportunities and this is reflected in the profile of the Saturday class.

The First Manchester lifelong learning team has benefited from membership of the North West Collective Learning Fund Pilot (CLF). The CLF programme funded a number of out of classroom activities where the learners were able to learn something of the history, geography and culture of the North West; for example, visiting Chester, Liverpool, Windermere and a number of museums and National Trust properties in the region. Membership of the CLF pilot has enabled the First Manchester team to share best practice with ULRs from companies that have experienced difficulties with ESOL provision.

Depot support worker, Gosia Piasecka, said: “I moved to Manchester over five years ago and couldn't speak a word of English. I started attending the ESOL classes on Saturdays and found the relaxed and friendly environment made it easier to learn. It's not like school where you have to learn – here you are encouraged and supported every step of the way by the ULRs. My confidence has improved greatly.”

As her English has improved, Gosia has been given more opportunities at work and she is currently studying for a PTLLS qualification.



# Learning out of hours

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# Shifting the learning balance

**Within the PCS Quorum branch in Newcastle, we have had to face several equality barriers since the centre opened in March 2004. We have been in a very privileged position where we have been able to overcome the majority of these but unfortunately we still struggle to overcome the barriers faced by many of our young and part-time members of staff, especially those working the twilight shifts.**

We have offered staff time off from the business to attend ESOL courses, breaking down some of the barriers that those who lack confidence in English had to face. This has not only helped the individuals increase their own confidence and self-esteem but also had a positive impact on the business. In addition, the individuals have improved their social lives, which led to them inspiring others in their communities to take on learning opportunities through their own workplaces and union learning representatives (ULRs) or Trade Union Education Centres.

Other initiatives we have implemented to ensure equality and diversity within the workplace have included securing funding for specialist equipment to be readily available within our learning centre, such as laptops to take home, large computer monitors to aid people with sight problems and also re-locating our learning centre to the ground floor to help it become more accessible for those employees with disabilities. This has had a positive impact on the number of staff accessing learning via the workplace, in addition to more people continuing on advanced courses.





By **Marie Pearson**  
Public and Commercial Services Union  
(PCS)

One highlight of my work was that we were able to borrow the Anne Frank Exhibition from Durham Council. I was fully briefed and delivered E&D learning around it to members of the public in Carlisle as well as reps and staff.

Unfortunately our main equality issue remains the inclusion of part-time staff in events such as Learning at Work Day. Our members still receive time away from the business to attend the event but as we rely on external agencies/volunteers to facilitate these events it is very difficult to persuade them to stay past peak hours, i.e. 5 pm. This puts our part-time staff at a disadvantage, as they often feel they are missing out on opportunities that their colleagues are being offered. Over the years we have tried several ways to include all part-time members, such as staggering the amount of agencies/volunteers throughout the day to encourage them to stay longer in addition to holding several learning events through the year at different times of the day but unfortunately the problem is still not fully resolved. We will continue to seek alternative solutions until such a time that all staff are catered for.

# It's Saturday School for teachers in the West Midlands

**It was Saturday School for teachers when the NASUWT organised a Learning Day in the heart of Birmingham. The idea for a Learning Day came from a group of NASUWT activists in the West Midlands region who wanted a more innovative way of engaging members not previously active within the union, through the route of learning.**

Saturday morning activities commenced at 9.30 am sharp with union learning, health and safety and school (workplace) representatives discussing their ideas and experiences of organising around learning in the workplace with National Executive members and other senior activists. As well as receiving up-to-date continuing professional development information on issues such as E-safety, changes to special educational needs requirements and taster sessions on sign language and Spanish, participants also had the opportunity to focus on their health and well-being with workshops on relaxation techniques and other health care.

The NASUWT West Midlands Facebook page was an essential platform for promoting the learning day and has since proven to be an effective organising and networking tool for West Midlands activists. The event attracted a diverse group of participants and in particular a large percentage of BME women members who had not previously participated in the union's activities.



By **Brian Cookson**  
National Treasurer, NASUWT

The innovative way in which the NASUWT West Midlands team has profiled the benefits of union learning through the twin approaches of professional development and well-being has been a great success. The union has a unique and hugely successful annual programme of national consultation conferences for women, LGBT, disabled, young and BME teachers which feeds into the NASUWT's campaigning and bargaining priorities on equalities issues and has also led to many of those members becoming more active in their local associations. Lifelong learning and the role of the union learning rep is an essential component of the union's organising and equalities agenda, thus events such as the WM Learning Day have proven to be an effective way of incorporating regional activities into this national programme.

# The Open University – for everyone!

**The Open University mission – “Open to people, places, methods and ideas” – has an underlying social justice element that seeks to enhance educational opportunity for all, with inclusion at the heart of all OU activities.**

## Disability

The OU has the highest disabled student population of any higher education institution in the UK – over 12,000 of the 200,000 student population per year are disabled. To enhance the student experience for all, we have national and regional dedicated disability teams. They have improved access to information about funding, to specialised equipment and teaching materials, and to technology and software. Disabled students’ testimonials highlight their improved self-confidence from learning with the OU, show they feel more appreciated by their employers, and confirm the value of enhanced access.

## Closing the ethnic minority attainment gap

In 2003, 6.8 per cent of students declared ethnic minority status, compared to 9.2 per cent in 2009/10. While the number of ethnic minority students has grown, their attainment gap continues to baffle researchers. This was highlighted in a 2003 DfES study, which found that despite high HE participation rates, minority ethnic students performed less well than their white peers<sup>1</sup>. However, the ethnicity attainment gap at the OU decreased from 20.6 per cent in 2006/07 to 17.5 per cent in 2009/10 and the research so far confirms that the current gap, which equals the part-time sector average, has nothing to do with the ability of ethnic minority students as evidenced by their prior attainment<sup>2</sup>. The University is participating in studies to



By **Akin Soetan**  
Partnership Manager, The Open University

ascertain whether this improvement is the result of better understanding and response to factors affecting attainment or of other social factors.

## Equality challenges

The OU's *Equality and Diversity Annual Report* for 2011 identified four key equality-related challenges:

- While overall numbers of students with a declared disability continue to increase, there is a marginal decline in the proportion of new undergraduates with a declared disability.
- While the OU has been ranked in one of the top three places for student satisfaction by the National Student Survey, there is a higher level of dissatisfaction among disabled students. Though not all complaints are disability-related, ten of the thirteen equality-related complaints were disability-focused. We are implementing a Securing Greater Accessibility plan to improve the experience of disabled students.
- While the overall ethnicity attainment gap has narrowed in recent years, the large attainment gap between different ethnic groups is still significant. The OU's plan is to address this via language development in the curriculum and enhanced language resources.
- A decline in the proportion of new male students studying at the OU, which we hope to address through marketing.

Our work with unionlearn has helped us to broaden participation and has empowered trade unionists and their families to get the most out of learning.

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<sup>1</sup> Connor, H., Tyers, C., et al., *Minority Ethnic Students in Higher Education: Interim Report* (London, DFES and The Institute for Employment Studies, 2003), pp. 74–7.

<sup>2</sup> OU/HEA Research Seminar (June 2011) *Ethnicity and Academic Attainment: promoting student access*. Section 9.

# Barriers to learning

**These are some of the most common barriers to learning:**

## Social and cultural barriers

- peer pressure
- family background.

## Practical and personal barriers

- transport
- time
- disability
- childcare
- caring responsibilities
- finance
- cost
- age
- language
- lack of access to information.

## Emotional barriers

- lack of self esteem or confidence due to low skills levels
- negative personal experience of learning
- previously undetected/unaddressed learning disabilities
- social problems such as unemployment, abuse or bullying.

## Workplace

- time off
- unsupportive managers
- access
- shift work
- discrimination
- isolation.

### **What can employers do?**

- recognise and support union learning reps (ULRs), giving them time to work across the whole workforce
- support a learning culture in the workplace
- ensure learning and training opportunities are flexible to enable access across all shifts and grades
- recognise learners' achievements
- actively seek to support the most vulnerable
- consider incentivising engagement with learning
- look at your whole workforce plan with the union
- develop and improve learning agreements.

# Resources

TUC Education provides numerous resources and courses on a wide range of equalities issues:

- *Disabled workers – a TUC Education workbook*
- *Equality reps – a TUC Education course*
- *Breaking the Silence on Domestic Violence*
- *Diploma in Equalities course*
- *Disability Champions course*
- *Out at Work – a TUC Education workbook*
- *Tackling Racism – a TUC Education workbook*
- *Working Women – a TUC Education workbook*

See: [www.unionlearn.org.uk/education/index.cfm](http://www.unionlearn.org.uk/education/index.cfm)

TUC Education also designs and delivers e-Notes, which are web-based briefings on a range of issues such as the Equality Act 2010 and Additional Paternity Leave (APL) – see [www.tuclearning.net](http://www.tuclearning.net).

The Act is further explained in the *TUC Guide to Equality Law 2011*, which is available from TUC Publications on 020 7467 1294.



Every worker, regardless of age, race, gender, class, sexuality, disability or the passport they hold, should enjoy an equal chance to enhance their skills or learn something new at work.

This inspiring collection of articles and case studies will act as a spur to further efforts to break through the barriers and prove that equality can be at the heart of learning.

unionlearn  
Congress House  
London WC1B 3LS  
[www.unionlearn.org.uk](http://www.unionlearn.org.uk)